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Influencers as emerging actors in global digital propaganda

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journals.sagepub.com/home/ecs**Jian Xu** 

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Abstract

This article conceptualizes the emerging phenomenon of ‘influencer propaganda’, which we define as the various persuasive, strategic communicative actions by social media influencers that promote political and ideological agendas through popular content and emotional appeals, with the intent to affect behaviour and belief among their followers. The current discussion of such practices frequently reproduces a dichotomy of ‘illegitimate’ vs ‘legitimate’ political communication. In contrast to this, we propose viewing influencer propaganda as a near-global political activity that can be found in both domestic and external spheres, regardless of political system and national context. By illustrating this phenomenon with observations from China, we argue that influencer propaganda in China and beyond is not solely dictated by traditional political actors but is instead negotiated through the interplay of political, corporate, and personal interests, all mediated by the affordances of digital platforms and embodied in the influencers’ digital performances.

Keywords

China, digital propaganda, influencer politics, influencer propaganda, *wanghong*

Introduction

Since 2021, the politicization and politics of influencers have grabbed increasing media spotlight in the English-language media, as demonstrated in the extensive coverage of

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China and Russia's manipulation of influencers to target liberal democracies. *The New York Times* was among the first to cover the foreign social media personalities sponsored by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) who spread pro-Beijing messages on foreign social media platforms (Mozur et al., 2021). China is also accused of using ethnic-minority influencers to whitewash human rights abuses in Xinjiang on YouTube (Ryan et al., 2022). Similarly, Russia's state-funded news outlet was reported to have hired American social media influencers to interfere in the 2024 US election and hype anti-Ukraine narratives (Roth, 2024). Such influencers are widely criticized as part of China and Russia's disinformation campaigns and influence operations against the liberal democracies.

However, the use of influencers for influence operation is not a patent of authoritarian states. Liberal democratic governments, such as the United States, have also harnessed influencers for achieving their goals. For example, in early 2022, the White House and National Security Council briefed TikTok influencers on the Ukraine crisis to help sway public opinion over Russia's invasion among global young TikTok users (Kelly, 2022). Moreover, the Global Engagement Centre (GEC) within the Bureau of Global Public Affairs at the US State Department also collaborates with local influencers, such as in Africa, in countering China and Russia's disinformation campaigns targeting these regions (Gedeon, 2024). However, these actions have received much less media coverage and are usually framed as counterattacks in self-defence. Only rarely do reports examine the connection between influencers and political actors within domestic contexts, for instance the role that influencers played in promoting partisan agendas during the 2024 US election (Zakrzewski, 2024).

In this article, we go beyond the 'illegitimate' vs 'legitimate' dichotomy and examine influencer propaganda as a global phenomenon with common characteristics. In this, we follow earlier attempts to complicate and deepen understandings of 'propaganda'. As Cunningham (2002) wrote at the turn of the millennium, 'we need to find the most theoretically instructive ways to talk about or describe the phenomenon of propaganda, ways of describing that will also do justice to its epistemic complexity, its obvious symbolic texture, and its broad, cultural scope' (p. 156). We take up this 'epistemic complexity' by contributing to the scholarship that asks how political influence morphs when it goes digital (see, for example, Benkler et al., 2018; Lin, 2024; Surowiec-Capell, 2024 and the contributions in MacLeod, 2019). Moreover, we also draw attention to the domestic dimension of influencer propaganda to comprehensively understand influencer politics across different political systems.

In the following, we first explain and define the concept of 'influencer propaganda', which is so far missing in academic research. Second, we will use China as an example to demonstrate how multiple players co-create influencer propaganda. Last but not least, we will point out future directions for research on influencer propaganda in the global context, and we will reflect on the normative implications of placing the propaganda concept on more neutral analytical footing, at a time of near-ubiquitous online manipulations and distortions.

Understanding and defining 'influencer propaganda'

Propaganda is usually understood as 'the attempt to transmit social and political values in the hope of affecting people's thinking, emotions, and behavior' (Kenez, 1985: 4). As

such, it is a form of strategic communication (Schneider, 2023). More specifically, political propaganda refers to various communicative actions conducted by political actors that aim at promoting a particular political agenda or ideology or influencing public opinion for the purpose of shaping the target audience's point of view (Jowett and O'Donnell, 2015).

Propaganda often carries negative connotations, predominantly describing the pervasive information manipulation, control, and deception known from totalitarian regimes as they attempt to exploit the emotions and beliefs of audiences at home and abroad (Jowett and O'Donnell, 2015). Liberal democracies use more neutral terms, such as 'public relations' or 'public diplomacy' to refer to similar persuasive techniques and actions. This demonstrates the politics and ideology behind the terminology of classic propaganda studies, which has hindered holistic and comparative understandings of wider phenomena ranging from information dissemination to public persuasion (Cunningham, 2002). Therefore, we treat 'influencer propaganda' as a neutral term that describes communicative activities in both liberal-democratic and authoritarian contexts. We take it as a trend that has grown out of the evolving landscape of 'digital propaganda' in today's platform society and influencer economy.

Digital propaganda refers to the digitalization of propaganda, facilitated by the availability and affordability of information and communication technologies (ICTs) (Surowiec-Capell, 2024). An equivalent term has been 'computational propaganda', which likewise refers to various digitally-enabled propaganda tactics, such as using bots and trolls, algorithms and deepfake, mainly to distribute false information through social media networks (Lin, 2024). As Surowiec-Capell (2024) argues, 'the digitalization of propaganda shows a state of flux, namely its adaptability to evolving media landscapes' (p. 214), and it keeps generating new 'actants' in 'manufacturing consensus'. We take influencers as such a new 'actant' or 'propagandist' in an increasingly platformized media landscape.

'Influencer propaganda' essentially embodies influencer politics. Arnesson and Reinikainen (2024) point out that the idea of influencers as 'political actors' or 'ideological intermediaries' has become prominent in the 2020s and has accelerated the 'politicisation of influencers'. They argue that influencer politics represents 'a specific form of convergence between the personal, political, and promotional in contemporary digital media and society' and that studies on the topic should focus on 'how the core ideas of influencer culture – authenticity, intimacy, commercialism, and self-branding – shape the ways in which politics are expressed and understood in this context, as well as opening up space for new ways of connecting with the public' (Arnesson and Reinikainen, 2024: 7). For influencer propaganda, we are specifically interested in looking at how the core ideas of influencer culture (see Abidin, 2018; Craig et al., 2021) shape the ways propaganda is conducted. If we take traditional political propaganda as content that political actors produce and spread, using mass media, for the purpose of advancing their political agenda and ideology among target audiences, then influencer propaganda has transformed these traditional activities in five important ways.

First, as individual influencers become propagandists, governments, official media and politicians are no longer the sole actors in propaganda. Influencers are at times employed by other political actors who reward them, turning them into agents of established interests. However, they also possess their own agency, either shaping traditional

propaganda agendas through their actions or doing propaganda voluntarily. Their activities can be motivated by a range of interests, such as a quest for more online traffic, the hope of economic gain, or personal conviction. Examples of the latter are activists who use ‘agitational propaganda’ to promote progressive causes (Ismangil and Schneider, 2023) but also otherwise apolitical influencers who find themselves compelled to take political positions after being involuntarily thrust into crises such as wars (Pelevina et al., 2024). In any case, the network of actors who produce propaganda has expanded significantly.

Second, the outlets of propaganda have shifted: in what Chadwick (2013) has called ‘hybrid media systems’, social media, video-sharing sites, short-video apps, and live-streaming services augment legacy media to create complex communicative ecosystems, and digital services are the main platforms in such systems for influencer propaganda, with influencers having many followers and strong impacts in these domains. For influencer propaganda, this means that such social media activities interact with traditional mass media propaganda in complementary, hybridized and at times substitutive ways. For example, interviews with young people in Germany (16–22 years old) show that influencers have become complementary sources for this cohort to comprehend or evaluate political information obtained from the traditional news channels, or to access political news and opinions that are not covered by traditional news broadcasts (Peter and Muth, 2023).

Third, commercial platforms sometimes also participate in influencer propaganda both directly and indirectly by using their advantage of owning the user data and the power of manipulating the algorithm, content moderation and monetization policies. In this way, they become active private actors in the ‘digital influence industry’ (Bakir and Briant, 2024).

Fourth, in terms of content, the affordances of these digital media platforms allow influencer propagandists to produce short, personalized, highly visual, interactive, shareable, and entertaining content laden with propaganda information, making propaganda more participatory, decentralized and peer-based.

Finally, influencer propaganda leverages the power of para-social relations, and especially the ways in which social media prompt actors to mobilize support through the affective dimensions of digital communication. As Pelevina et al. (2024) show, platforms like Instagram provide ‘sticky surfaces on which affects nest’, and in such contexts influencers are ‘producers of affective atmospheres through their affective labour’ (p. 162). This interaction between personal (and: personalized) content-generation and the infrastructures of the digital attention economy transforms how affect operates in politics, and how perceptions of e.g. ‘authenticity’ (see Audrezet et al., 2020) shape the efficacy of political influencing.

Based on the above characteristics, we propose a working definition for the concept of influencer propaganda. It refers to various persuasive, strategic communicative actions by social media influencers that promote political and ideological agendas through popular content and emotional appeals, with the intent to affect behaviour and belief among their followers. Such practices have created an emerging affective digital propaganda space in which the government, individual influencers, digital platforms and the capital behind them co-conduct popular propaganda for their individual

benefits. It is a near-global phenomenon and can be found in both domestic and external spheres, regardless of political system and national context.

Doing influencer propaganda: lessons from China

China is often well ahead of many other societies in terms of digital trends, especially in the use of digital technologies for social governance, and this is also true for the role that influencer propaganda plays there. In that sense, China provides important context for studying and theorizing such practices. While there is much more to unpack about the Chinese situation than what our short discussion can do justice to, three observations do stand out.

First, foreign media have widely criticized the CCP's use of 'foreign influencers' (known in Chinese as *laowai wanghong*) to promote pro-China narratives, particularly on controversial issues such as Covid-19 and human rights in Xinjiang. Commentators abroad view this strategy of 'borrowing mouths to speak' as part of China's broader soft power initiative to shape global perceptions and counter negative portrayals in foreign media. For instance, some foreign YouTubers participated in guided tours to Xinjiang organized by state-affiliated entities, where they filmed curated content that aligned with official Chinese narratives (Allen and Williams, 2021). The vloggers first posted these pro-China videos on their YouTube channels – some with hundreds of thousands of followers – and state media outlets like China Global Television Network (CGTN) later selectively repurposed these videos as testimonial evidence to refute foreign criticisms of China (see Global Stringer, 2021). While these influencers have been accused of being co-opted by the CCP, there is no direct evidence of financial compensation from the Chinese government. However, what motivates this group to speak in defence of China remains underexplored.

For example, British YouTuber Lee Barrett and American YouTuber Nathan Rich, both accused of being CCP sympathizers, have achieved significant celebrity status within China's digital space. They have considerably more followers on Chinese platforms like Bilibili and Weibo than on American social media. As transnational influencers straddling Chinese and American platforms, they are particularly well positioned to engage with the Chinese market. Defending and praising China has become a niche strategy for them that aligns with both China's official campaign of 'Telling China's Story Well' (Xu and Gong, 2024) and the surge in online nationalism (Schneider, 2024). This positioning has enabled them to rapidly grow their Chinese audiences. Their content, which is posted on YouTube (targeting international viewers) and Chinese platforms (targeting domestic audiences), serves both external propaganda (countering anti-China narratives) and domestic propaganda (boosting national pride and anti-Western sentiment), thereby blurring the boundaries between the two.

A more complex example of influencer propaganda is seen in American YouTuber IShowSpeed's trip to China in 2025 (March 24–April 11), which appears driven more by influencer entrepreneurship and market capital than by direct CCP coordination. Reports indicate that Speed's visit was facilitated by East Goes Global, a US-based digital talent agency specializing in managing American celebrities and brands in the Chinese market. They coordinated the logistics and schedule, working alongside the Chinese company

88rising, which supported Speed's social media presence in China (Wang, 2025). With over 39 million YouTube subscribers, Speed's livestreams from several Chinese cities attracted millions of global viewers on YouTube. Clips from his streams were widely shared on Chinese social platforms, garnering significant engagement. During his trip, his team launched official accounts for him on popular Chinese social media platforms, such as Weibo and Douyin, which quickly amassed millions of followers – signalling a clear interest in expanding his presence in the Chinese digital economy.

In contrast to the previously mentioned pro-China influencers, Speed's livestreams avoided political content. Instead, they showcased unscripted, real-time cross-cultural interactions with local Chinese people, including his reactions to Chinese food, culture, technology and urban environments. This content offered a candid and spontaneous view of China that diverged from mainstream foreign media portrayals. As a result, his visit garnered substantial attention from Chinese state media and government organizations. This is somewhat ironic, considering that Speed's coverage did not always neatly align with the CCP's propaganda on 'positive energy' (*zheng nengliang*). The livestream certainly contained plenty of positive comments of China, but it also included awkward moments of intercultural friction, such as racist comments from Chinese passers-by, which would not have been found in any official main-melody production. Arguably, however, it is precisely such idiosyncrasies that give an influencer production like this one the sense of authenticity that CCP propaganda often lacks. Overall, however, the livestreams coincided, perhaps inadvertently, with China's post-pandemic efforts to revamp its international image, boost tourism, and project soft power. As the Chinese Embassy in the United States commented on its official X account, Speed's visit 'indicates a broader trend of digital influencers bridging cultural gaps and creating alternative channels for foreign audiences to understand a vibrant China' (Chinese Embassy in US, 2025). Similarly, Xinhua (2025) News Agency cited a popular YouTube comment that received thousands of likes: 'The U.S. has spent billions on anti-China propaganda, only to be undone by Red Note and IShowSpeed stream'.

This case challenges the prevailing critique of China's influencer propaganda as a top-down, state-orchestrated propaganda campaign. What is often overlooked is the role of profit-driven capital, both from China and overseas, which is capitalizing on China's burgeoning and lucrative digital economy to incubate transnational, cross-platform influencers. The Chinese government and state media, keen to 'Tell China's Story Well', have proactively repurposed such organically created content, like Speed's China tour, to serve their soft power objectives. As state-led soft power initiatives face growing criticism for lacking authenticity, the Chinese government has recognized the potential of non-state actors in advancing its soft power. Rather than relying solely on administrative mechanisms, it is increasingly willing to unleash benign soft power driven by market logic and led by non-state actors for greater effectiveness (Xu and Qu, 2025). The evolution of influencer propaganda illustrates this shift.

Second, China's use of local influencers for propaganda reflects a distinct approach compared to practices elsewhere. In liberal democracies, the government and political parties pay selected influencers to endorse propaganda campaigns, such as political election (Zakrzewski, 2024) and Covid-19 vaccination (Kelly, 2021). However, in China this kind of domestic propaganda does not seem to be directly financed through cash payment

to the influencers. The platforms play a very important intermediary role in the process, given the collaborative and symbiotic relations between the state and platform corporations (Xu and Yu, 2022). As ‘entrepreneurial labour’ (Yu et al., 2022), influencers have to promote ‘positive energy’ and promote various government-endorsed agendas in order to be recommended by the platform-controlled algorithms and obtain more visibility. The rise of influencer philanthropy (Jeffreys and Xu, 2024) is a pertinent example to demonstrate China’s government-platform-influencer nexus in doing propaganda and achieving developmental goals, such as poverty alleviation through *wanghong*-led livestreaming e-commerce to sell local agricultural products. Micro-celebrities are now expected to follow in the footsteps of role models by engaging in socially beneficial activities and voluntarily promoting mainstream ideology.

Third, the CCP has innovatively adopted what one of us has called ‘*wanghong thinking*’ (Xu, 2024) to revamp its traditional propaganda. Learning from the self-branding strategies of social media influencers, the CCP has actively turned some traditional propagandists, such as government officials and state media journalists, into active influencers with millions of followers. They serve to soften and popularize official narratives by embedding them in everyday digital content and interactive digital formats such as livestreams. Prominent examples of this are China’s so-called *wanghong* mayors (see Sullivan et al., 2023) and *wanghong* diplomats (see Xu, 2024). This has extended the scope of influencer propaganda as captured in our own definition from ‘influencers-turned-propagandists’ to include emerging ‘propagandists-turned-influencers’.

Conclusion and future direction

What emerges from these observations in China is a complex landscape in which political power, digital platforms, entrepreneurial influencers and the capital backing them intersect in the production of influencer propaganda. This development challenges simplified stereotypes that view propaganda in China solely as top-down Party manipulation. Our goal has been to outline the contours of these practices and to suggest potential directions for further research beyond China. We argue that influencer propaganda is not solely dictated by traditional political actors but is instead negotiated through the interplay of political, corporate, and personal interests, all mediated by the affordances of digital platforms and embodied in the influencers’ digital performances.

It is important to take influencers not as passive propagandists co-opted by the state or political power but as new actors who interact with such power, but also with platforms and audiences, to achieve their own goals by doing propaganda. Moreover, given the rise of influencer politicians in the global context, we also suggest paying attention to how the traditional propaganda actors are adopting influencer strategies to innovate their propaganda practices.

Last but not least, we suggest going beyond the dichotomy of ‘illegitimate’ and ‘legitimate’ influencer propaganda to critically examine the differences and similarities of influencer propaganda in authoritarian and democratic contexts, and to query what factors made their practices and ethics similar or different. Such an approach then also means reassessing propaganda and its effects, and specifically the ethical foundations on which we might place our normative judgements about such practices. Embracing a

broad, more analytical definition of propaganda (and of related terms like computational propaganda or influencer propaganda) does not mean avoiding moral judgements. As scholars of contemporary propaganda have argued (e.g. Benkler et al., 2018; Cunningham, 2002; Foley, 2021 and many of the contributions in MacLeod, 2019), the instrumentalist nature and simplifying rationales of influencing may very well damage the very fabrics of our societies.

In that sense, recalibrating our understandings of propaganda in the digital age means rethinking our capacity for critique beyond common assumptions about the legitimacy of liberal vs authoritarian political systems. It means asking how the pervasive proliferation of digitally-filtered and commercially-enhanced influence activity reshapes political realities around the world. And it pushes us to ask what might be done about the distorting effects that these practices have, in our ‘post-truth’ times.

Data availability statement

Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no datasets were generated or analysed during the current study.

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